

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 9 | Number 1 (1909)

pps. 66-73

Miss Mary R. Whitcomb

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/).

Recommended Citation

"Miss Mary R. Whitcomb." *The Annals of Iowa* 9 (1909), 66-73.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.3527>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://iowaresearchonline.org/)

MISS MARY R. WHITCOMB.

Miss Mary R. Whitcomb, Assistant Curator of the Historical Department of Iowa, died in Des Moines, April 8, 1909. By a few days exceeding a year her death followed the death of the founder and builder of the Department, the late Charles Aldrich, whose faithful and efficient assistant she was for twelve years.

Miss Whitcomb was born in Grinnell, Iowa, April 4, 1860. Like so many sons and daughters of that college town she came of fine stock. Her ancestry on both sides was of New England blood and she exhibited all of those traits of disposition and culture that give so much flavor to the characters and conduct of descendants of the Puritans—a constant endeavor after intellectual achievement and culture, a stern discipline of life by conscience and industry, and devotion to high ideals in religion and public service. Her mother, pursuant to a practice that was common with the ambitious youth of New England, was for some time a teacher in the wilds of Tennessee. As a result of Mr. J. B. Grinnell's letters to the *N. Y. Tribune* her parents came west in 1854, joining their fortunes with the pioneers of the town of Grinnell, where they became considerable factors in church and communal life.

Miss Whitcomb spent her childhood and youth in Grinnell. She graduated from the city High School in 1877 and entered Iowa College the fall of that year. In the College halls and classes she speedily demonstrated high order of ability and force of character, that won admiration and aroused expectations of future achievement among classmates that included such men as Professor Oliver F. Emerson, now of Western Reserve University of Cleveland, Professor George M. Whicher of New York City College, and Mr. George White, a distinguished American Missionary in Turkey, Asia Minor, and a Professor in Marsivan College. The death of her mother in 1881 prevented Miss Whitcomb graduating with her class in 1882.

Beginning in the fall of 1883 Miss Whitcomb began teaching in the public schools of Grinnell where she continued for the next three years. In 1886, following in the footsteps of

her mother nearly half a century before, she went to Mobile, Ala., to teach in a school for negro children, conducted by the American Missionary Association. She remained at that post for four years. She enjoyed the buoyancy and artless, boundless simplicity of the negroes; and animated by the serene, superb self-sufficiency of a missionary, she laughed at the snubs and social ostracism to which she was subject at the hands of the haughty Southerners among whom she went in the course of her work. Full of charm and rich in instruction as were her experiences in that Southern city, they were finally to prove disastrous to her health. In 1890 she fell ill of a malady (incident to the region) which fastened upon her delicate constitution with a firm grip, leaving her a weak heart that ultimately was to succumb to overtax from routine and responsibility. She was forced to abandon her work and come North. She entered school work again in the fall of 1890 at Dundee, Ill., where she continued until the Christmas vacation of 1891. While on a visit at Grinnell her health gave way to nervous prostration and for a time death seemed imminent. Despite the adverse opinions of physicians, in the course of a year she slowly recovered. With such feeble health most persons would have lapsed into a career of invalidism; but to her the role of the invalid, with doleful countenance and mournful complaints was utterly intolerable. Summoning the pluck of her stock she again set about the task of an independent livelihood. In March 1894 she was appointed to the position of assistant in the State Library. She remained there until 1896, when she was appointed by Mr. Charles Aldrich as assistant in the Historical Department wherein she continued to work until her death.

Amidst the books and documents, the papers and periodicals, and the rare and precious records of the past that weighted the shelves of alcove and workroom, Miss Whitcomb came into her own. Books and literature were a part of her family traditions and made much of the warp and woof of her life. In the serene silence of library, she found tasks sufficient, congenial, satisfying, affording both delight and culture, making life worth while. Existence to her was not sharply divided

"in books or work or healthful play" as Watts specifies. She found all three in one and in one place.

Her fondness and fitness for her new work she demonstrated forthwith by that sure sign of an efficient worker—instant and constant attention to the details and minutia of the administration of the Library. She was not a mere clerk whose sole concern was the receipt of an increasing stipend with decreasing effort. The care of old tomes, were they never so tattered and torn, never so musty and mouldy, was not a disgusting or drearish drudgery. To her it was a part of her profession whence information, instruction, aye, a liberal culture in the ancient and honorable craft of Gutenberg and Caxton was obtainable if one will but enter upon the work with an alert, discerning eye and persistent purpose. Inquiry about books and data from students or strangers was never met with a nonchalant response, "I don't know," simply and perhaps *sotto voce* "I don't care either." All information she possessed and all her resources for securing the facts were immediately placed at the disposal of the inquirer. Her memory was vigorous and facile and if she had ever looked the matter up the data desired was forthcoming almost at once. If unfamiliar to her, her search for it was immediate and without stint until she had discovered the document or learned definitely that the library did not possess it. More than this it was her wont to keep the inquiry in mind for weeks and months and after you had ceased to expect or perhaps to think of the subject she would report some find or give some clew to the data wished.

But Miss Whitecomb did not rest content with being an active, helpful executive worker merely. She was more than faithful and industrious. She made her work her own. She sought constantly to enhance the usefulness of the Collections; and the Department and the public were the beneficiaries of her constructive work. She installed a card index of the books, newspapers, pamphlets and portraits; and she classified and arranged all books on the shelves and labeled and numbered them according to the schedules of the Dewey System. She did not supervise others; she did the actual mechanical work herself. During the past eight years, if not for a longer

period, she had practical charge of the publication of *The Annals*, editing and preparing the contributions for the printers and carrying the burden of proof-reading. In the later years she in large measure determined the character of the contents. In building up the collections she chiefly attended to the selection of the books purchased. She devoted particular attention to the acquisition of materials bearing upon the history of our Indian tribes, the growth of Iowa, Western History, the Civil War, and Genealogical collections.

Over and above these matters her constructive abilities were displayed in some scholarly contributions to the history of Iowa. *The Annals* contain three interesting and valuable articles from her pen: The first, "Reminiscences of Gen. Jas. C. Parrott," (Vol. III., pp. 364-383); the second, "Mrs. Annie Wittenmyer," (Vol. IV., pp. 277-288); and the third, "Abner Kneeland: His relations to Early Iowa History," (Vol. VI., pp. 340-363). The latter is her most substantial study. It deals with the stormy career of the much maligned founder of Salubria, whose character and conduct as a "Free-Thinker" was anathema, sixty years since, to all churchmen from Massachusetts to the Missouri "Slope." Miss Whitecomb, without entering upon the debatable grounds of his doctrines gives us a solid account of his chequered, not to say, tempestuous career in Massachusetts and Iowa, recovering for us and presenting in lucid narrative the major facts of the life of one of New England's most interesting characters. Her study was an earnest of the scholarly work she would have done but for the hindrance of feeble health. At the time of her death she had a considerable body of memorabilia of her late chief, Charles Aldrich, in the form of correspondence, notes and rescripts of conversations and his racy sayings, which she hoped sometime to weld into a story or into sketches of the character of Mr. Aldrich whom she knew and admired thoroughly and served so faithfully and well.

Some of the most interesting phases of Miss Whitecomb's life and character were manifest in her relations with Mr. Aldrich. When she entered upon her work in the Department in 1896, Mr. Aldrich was approaching what for most men is life's last mile post—three score and ten. But to him then life was full

of zest. He was pursuing the chief ambition of his life with a vigor that was bringing things to pass. But the currents of hope and zeal that charged his soul energized a frail body hampered by feeble health and cruelly racked by bronchial affliction. The minutia of execution, the prosaic details of adjustment in the aggravating circumstances of practical decision, distracted and fretted him; anon they got "on his nerves" and sometimes harassed him. He must needs have a care-taker whose judgment was competent and whose earnestness and loyalty would enable him to realize his major purposes. Miss Whitcomb had not been long in the Department before her alert intelligence, industry, and efficiency, especially her manner of doing things, won Mr. Aldrich's confidence completely; and in the work of the Department she soon became his *alter ego*. Discernment, discrimination, discretion were marked elements in her conduct. She realized fully the public significance of his work and the necessity for caution and constant attention to the thousand and one little things that constitute the grit and muss of daily work, and make or mar matters of moment according as they are scrupulously attended to or neglected. She was an excellent counselor because while she always felt deeply and strongly upon matters that engaged her serious attention; she never lost her head. In questions of taste she possessed a keen appreciation of the niceties of expression and form, and of fitness as to time and place. In matters of policy she looked fore and aft. Equipoise and firmness, sanity and sobriety, characterized her judgment when affairs brought perplexity. So sane, reliable and sufficient was her counsel that the brunt and burden of the work of the Department slowly, as the months grew into years, fell upon her shoulders, and the responsibility for its conduct gravitated completely into her safe-keeping.

Miss Whitcomb possessed a personality that displayed varied and striking characteristics—most of them peculiar to her New England blood. In speech she was concise and direct, nice and precise. In her work there was no fuss or splutter; she was quiet and steady and systematic. Her desk was always in "ship-shape" condition so that she could put her hand on any paper she had in her care. In matters of business

she was exacting—statements and details had to be explicit and complete. To inquiries her responses were immediate, plump, frank, unequivocal. She hit the nail and nothing else. In her relations with casual acquaintances or visitors her conversation was marked by brevity but it was not unkindly and was sufficient for the purpose. Miss Whitcomb was not one of the oppressive species that seeks constantly to impress people with the high character of their achievements, with their fame and importance in the Commonwealth, or to captivate by artful graciousness and effusive courtesies and pretences of devotion. In her greetings of old-time friends and acquaintances and in converse with them she was cordial. If ill health did not depress she was vivacious in conversation, quick in repartee; a winsome smile, illumining her clear blue eyes and finely chiseled features, would indicate her pleasure, or a blithesome laugh signify her appreciation of the point of a story or the edge of a witty remark. She did not cultivate people or seek to extend the circuit of her influence as is the wont of mortals. She enjoyed a small circle of friends and got pleasure in the ordinary forms of simple diversion. Conversation with her did not run into idle tittle-tattle either petty or malevolent. Books and nature, science and scholarship, and works of art, music and painting, the careers and doings of friends—and silence, the rarest privilege of friendship of the solid sort—characterized her intercourse with her friends. But her relations with her intimate friends and associates were not common.

Her normal human nature, her personal interest, her attachments and prejudices, she demonstrated in sundry subtle ways obvious only to the sharply observant, but her manner of address and converse was generally distinguished by aloofness and reserve. Her friends saw her, talked with her, knew her; nevertheless they were aware that she herself stood apart, remote. She indulged neither herself nor her friends nor associates with confidences that make up so much of the ordinary friendships and color relationships of life. Those she held in high esteem she not infrequently greeted with a brusqueness and hauteur, sometimes with an acerbity of speech that would perplex those unfamiliar with the charac-

teristics of her manner; but her intimates knew that physical distress or depression was the antecedent condition and immediate cause. The most notable phase of her reserve was her complete reticence respecting her life and personal experiences outside of the routine of the office.

In her relations with Mr. Aldrich, Miss Whitcomb exhibited another interesting phase of her self-restraint. In no respect was she forward or presumptuous with opinions—not even when the entire administration of the internal affairs of the Department had become her special charge. She tendered no opinions as to plans or policy unsolicited. If she proffered suggestions or made recommendations they were incident to work previously assigned her. She never went ahead on her own motion, even though she might feel certain that she would be directed to attend to the work in hand. Her deference was complete and likewise her courtesy. From these qualities, coupled with her efficiency, grew Mr. Aldrich's confidence in her loyalty and his assurance that the affairs of the Department were in safe hands under her prudent administration.

To her associates and co-workers in the Department there was no part of her character or conduct more interesting than her influence over Mr. Aldrich and the modes of its exercise. Mr. Aldrich was a man of vigorous character and staunch will, once his mind was made up—and from the major plans of his designs for the development of the Department he seldom or never retreated; but in the tactics of their promotion, in the minor manoeuvres of their daily advancement he would frequently act on impulse—particularly was he likely to allow personal friendships to obscure his vision and prompt to action that sundry considerations of far-sighted policy would enjoin. He seldom failed to ask her advice before proceeding and if she did not concur, her disapproval was usually effective. To Mr. Aldrich her disapproval created a presumption that he must be wrong and consequently her better judgment should prevail.

Miss Whitcomb cared nothing for the tawdry fame of much mention in the public prints, so anxiously sought by persons of common mould. She found her delight and her solace in her work, in its details and exactions. But she shrank from

the public responsibilities of office that brought her into clash with petty critics or collision with the warring elements of politics. Her health could not stand the wear and tear of contention. With her chief to serve as the steel edge of the wedge and take the brunt of the forward push of the work she could serve masterfully. In the latter years she carried easily the whole load of petty detail and supervised the general administration. Without a question she prolonged the life and vigor of Mr. Aldrich at the critical period of his public career, enabling him to prosecute his work with success and realize e'er death closed his eyes the dreams of his youth and to gaze upon the stately structure on Capitol hill wherein his precious collections are now safeguarded against the thieves of time. Her life and work, her charm and force of character will live long in the memories of those who had the privilege of coming within the circuit of her influence.

RESOLUTIONS.

ADOPTED BY BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE STATE LIBRARY AND HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT.

WHEREAS, since our last meeting death has removed Miss Mary R. Whitcomb, Assistant Curator of this Department and for many years the efficient and ever faithful Secretary of this Board;

And, WHEREAS, we desire to place of record some token of our high regard and esteem for the departed;

And, WHEREAS, we are fully aware of the inestimable value and importance of her work to the State increased and multiplied by the enfeebled condition of health and death of her superior, Hon. Charles Aldrich;

And, WHEREAS, she always bore her burdens without complaint, did more than her duty without grumbling, continued at her work without regard to her personal convenience, efficiently performed every task and satisfactorily served during many years as Secretary of this Board:

Now, therefore, *Be It Resolved*;

1. That we deeply deplore our loss, and knowing full well the value of her work to the State, sincerely regret that it has been deprived of her most efficient services.

2. That to her relatives we extend our sincere sympathy, and that

3. These resolutions be spread of record as a memento to her faithfulness and efficiency.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.